

## **SHEEP CREEK RANCH CONSERVATION EASEMENT PROPOSAL**



# WILDLIFE HABITAT LAND PROJECT PROPOSAL

(vers. 4/2019)

## INSTRUCTIONS

**FORMAT:** Please follow this template to cover required information and help streamline scoring. Instructions/italicized notes should be removed for the actual proposal. Including inserted images of the property as part of the proposal is encouraged. Saving the final proposal in an Adobe (pdf) format will reduce file size for emailing.

**SUBMISSION:** Submit as an electronic file both to the Habitat Bureau Chief and the Wildlife Division Office Manager. If the file is too large for email, please submit through the Montana File Transfer Service and send an email notification.

**PLEASE NOTE:** If selected, Project Proposals will be part of the Fish and Wildlife Commission packet for commission endorsement and will be available for public review – *please develop a professional proposal.*

1. **Region:** 4      **Regional Supervisor:** Gary Bertellotti

**Name of Applicant(s):** Cory Loecker

2. **Date:** 5/25/2019

3. **Project Name:** Easement **Type of Project:** (Fee Title or Easement or Land Exchange)

*(The project name should avoid the landowner's name unless it is part of the formal ranch name. Work with the landowner to select a name that is intended to serve as the official name in perpetuity—please select a name that will be permanent to avoid a future name change and associated confusion. Geographic identifiers are preferred, such as "Sunday Creek Conservation Easement". Fee title purchases intended as additions to WMAs should be described as such, e.g., "Divide Creek Addition to Fleecer WMA".)*

4. **Size:** *(Acres of private ownership and acres of federal and state lease lands).*

Sheep Creek Ranch consists of 5,300 deeded and 2,500 leased BLM and DNRC acres. The property also provides access to approximately 5,920 (5400 BLM, 520 DNRC) acres of legally adjoining public lands. Sum recreational access provided by the project **11,220** acres in the heart of the Big Belt Mountains.

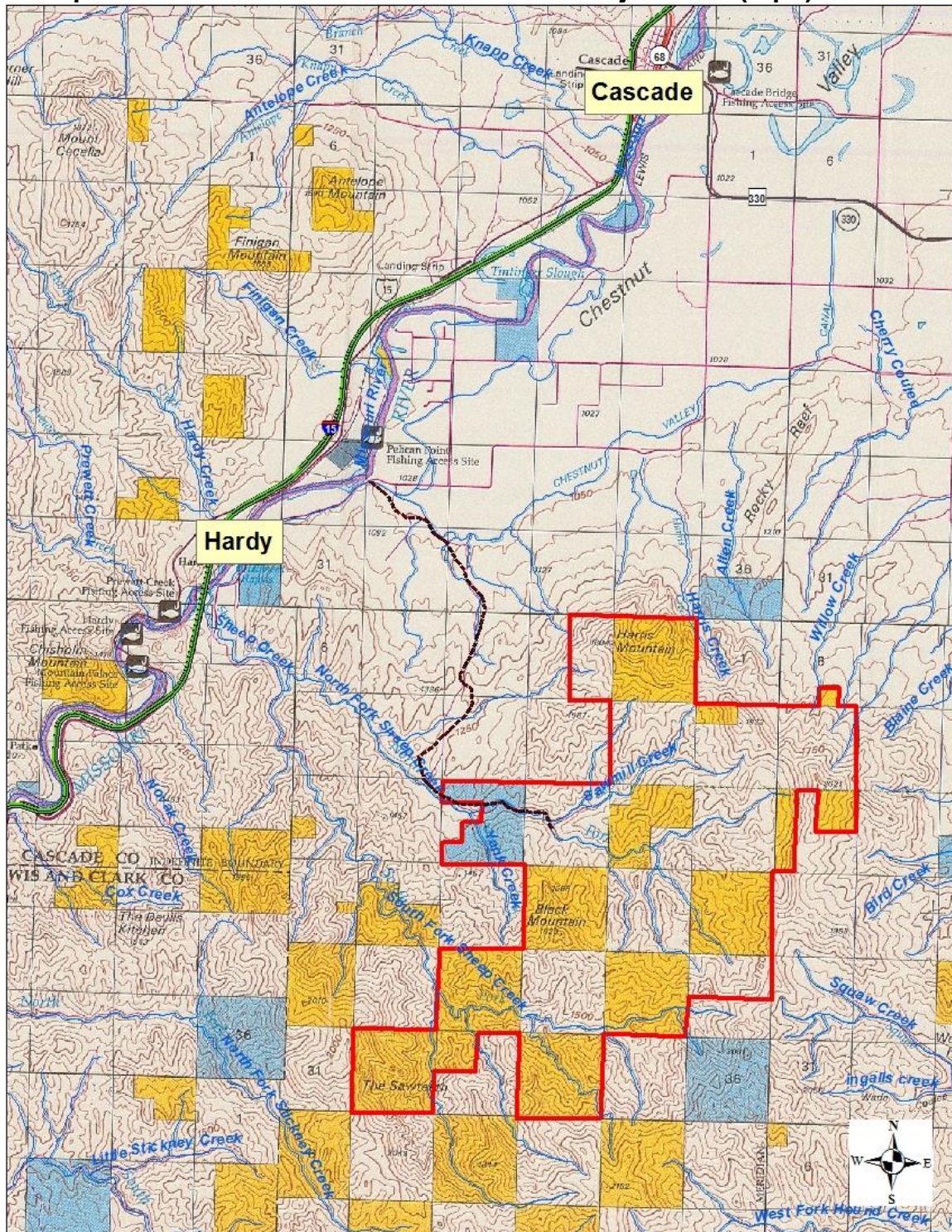
5. **Location:** *( Direction/Distance to nearest town, County, and FWP Region)*

Seven (7) miles south of Cascade, MT. Region 4. Cascade County.



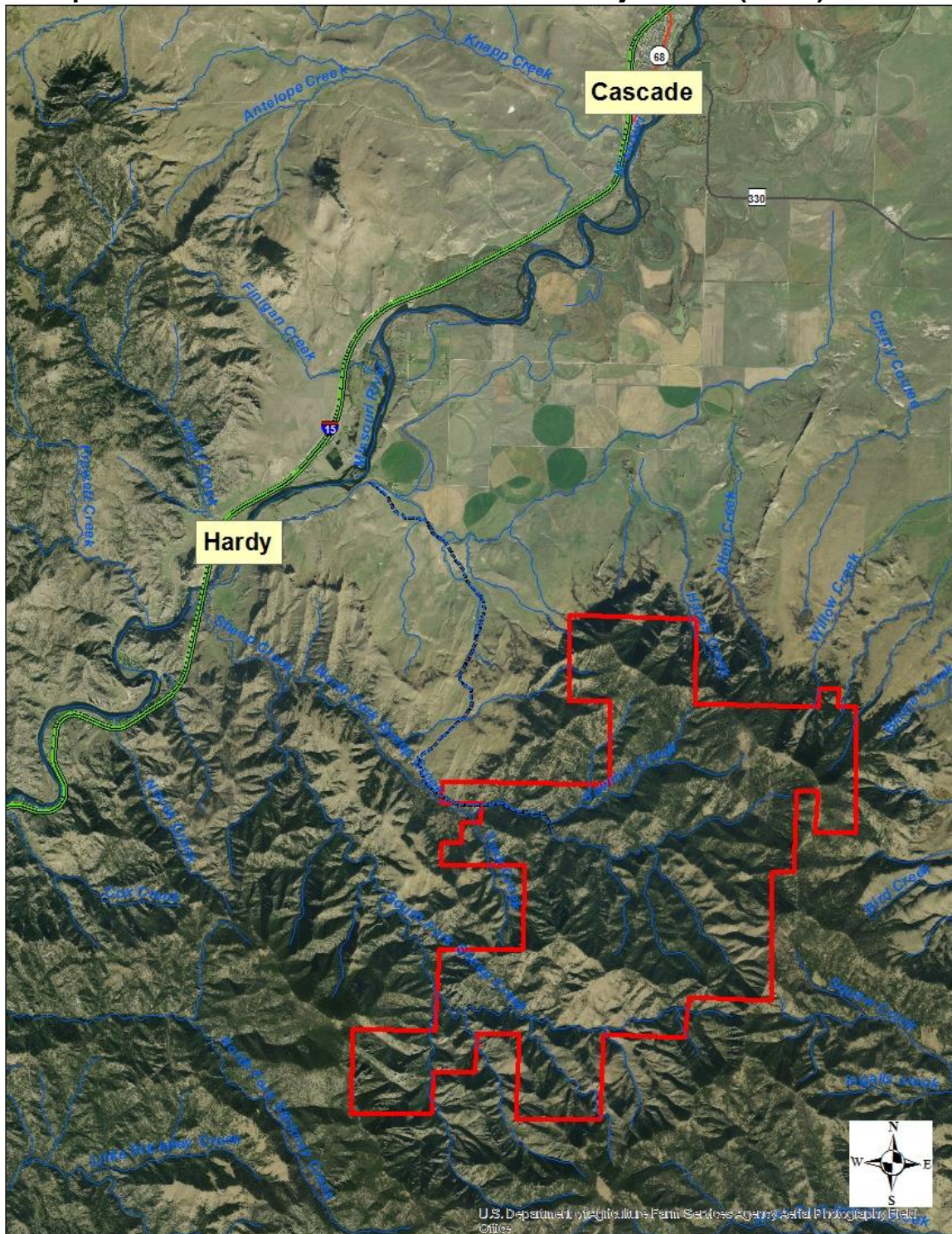
6. **Map(s):** (Insert a map(s) showing 1) proximity to other known landmarks and 2) ownership of all lands affected by the proposal, including leased public lands and property boundaries, overlaid on an aerial image or topographic map. Please include scale bars. Professional-looking maps, please.)

**Sheep Creek Ranch Conservation Easement Project Area (topo).**





**Sheep Creek Ranch Conservation Easement Project Area (aerial).**



7. **Project Need (Limit to 1,500 characters) – up to 10 pts.** *(Describe how the proposal fits with the Commission policy for purchasing interest in wildlife habitats. Please refer to [ARM](#) 12.9.508 thru 12.9.511)*

The Sheep Creek watershed is located in the Big Belt Mountains south of Cascade, Montana. This native mountain and intermountain foothill habitat consist mainly of private lands with some interspersed public lands (BLM and DNRC). Elevation ranges from 4,000 – 6,500 feet. Sheep Creek Ranch lies in the core of the Big Belt Mountains, providing some of the area's best fish and wildlife habitats. The intermountain and shrub grasslands in the uplands of the Rocky Mountains of Central Montana are key in maintaining stable bighorn sheep, elk, mule and white-tailed deer, mountain grouse, furbearer and other native species populations, including at least 30 "Species of Concern". Therefore, these habitats are also beneficial in maintaining huntable and viewable populations of game and non-game species, both migratory and resident.

The habitat diversity on the property is evident as it is characterized in the Middle Rocky Ecotype of mountainous terrain and intermixed riparian communities. Forested habitats consist of Douglas fir, lodgepole pine, ponderosa pine, subalpine fir, along with chokecherry, current, snowberry, aspen, alder, mountain maple, willow in native riparian habitats. Open parks and ridgetops also provide critical big game winter browse sources such as Wyoming big sagebrush, silver sagebrush, skunkbrush sumac, snowberry, fringed sagebrush, chokecherry. Native grass vegetation is a mix mostly comprised of rough fescue, Idaho fescue, bluebunch wheatgrass, mountain brome and basin wildrye with common forbs interspersed such as lupine, yarrow, arrowleaf balsamroot.

This proposed conservation easement would enable Sheep Creek Ranch to continue their private operation while protecting and improving habitats while providing recreational access. Goals of the Landowner is to maintain and perpetually protect the property for future generations in its current contiguous form and provide public recreational opportunities. Secondary goals include incorporating long-term timber management, wildlife and fisheries habitat enhancements and weed control efforts into land management practices to positively influence all species for the long term.



**North Fork Sheep Creek Drainage.**





**South Fork Sheep Creek Drainage.**







8. **Broad Terrestrial and Aquatic Habitat Criteria – up to 10 pts.** (*List Tier I Community Types (SWAP 2015) that make up a significant portion of the property. Please provide an approximate percentage makeup of each Tier I Community Type AND the percentage of tillage cropland that would remain in production, relative to the entire property acreage. Also, include the length of riparian/stream courses on the property.*)

Sheep Creek Ranch is entirely native mountain/foothill and mountainous riparian habitats in the heart of the Big Belt Mountain complex. No farm/cropped land occurs on the property. The ranch lies within the Middle Rockies Ecoregion. The entire property also has 100% community type Tier II Big Belts Terrestrial Focus area, including community type composition of approximately 75% Conifer-dominated Forest and Woodland; 15% Sage Steppe; 5% Montane Grassland and 5% Deciduous Shrubland. It is also 100% within the Tier III Terrestrial Community type designation (human land use).

Sheep Creek Ranch also lies 100% within Westslope Cutthroat Trout Distribution/Restoration Focal Area in FWP Region 4. This Focal Area is spread across a large area and includes mostly intact habitat throughout the entire range of the WCT conservation population within Region 4.

The property encompasses approximately **fifteen miles (15)** of the North and South Forks Sheep Creek which provide important riparian fish habitats from their headwaters to the Missouri River. An additional **five miles (5)** of secondary drainages Sawmill and Yank



Creeks (flowing to Sheep Creek) are also incorporated in the property. Important fish species including westslope cutthroat, brook, rainbow, and brown trout inhabit the Sheep Creek watersheds. Upper reaches of the South Fork Sheep Creek contain pure strain cutthroat trout.

**North Fork Sheep Creek.**









**South Fork Sheep Creek.**





**9. Project Level Criteria** *(write a short paragraph or bullet points for each bolded heading and provide associated figure(s) as appropriate)*

- a) **Site-Specific Habitat Values – up to 10 pts.** *(What makes the habitat on this property high value? For example: Are there valuable biological/ecological characteristics such as strategic seasonal habitat for game species or species of greatest conservation need (SWAP 2015)? Is there a unique plant community that exists as a remnant of its original distribution? Does the property comprise a mix of priority habitats or a unique intact expanse of habitat?)*

The Sheep Creek watershed provides excellent wildlife and fisheries habitats flowing to the Missouri River. These private lands are critical in providing habitats for wildlife species such as bighorn sheep, elk, moose, mule and white-tailed deer, grizzly bear, black bear, dusky grouse, ruffed grouse and Merriam's turkeys. Forest carnivores such as bobcat, mountain lion, wolf and wolverine also use the property and neighboring landscapes. Not only do most of these species utilize this area throughout most of the year, these lands also provide critical winter range for additional wintering elk, mule deer and bighorn sheep. Nongame species such as golden, bald eagle, goshawk, great grey owl are also plentiful. The property's location is key in species connectivity that require extensive habitat corridors (i.e. grizzly bear, wolverine, mountain lion and wolf). Protections such as this proposed conservation easement are critical in large landscape conservation.

- b) **Threat Status: PICK ONE** *(and provide brief explanation)*

- **IMMINENT - 10 pts:** *the land is proposed for activity within five years which will cause irreversible impacts.*
- **PROBABLE - 5 pts:** *strong trends in the vicinity of property have been toward conversion of the habitat (e.g., subdivision; cropland conversion), but no specific threat is underway.*
- **POSSIBLE- 2 pts:** *sporadic occurrences for habitat conversion, which may happen to the property, particularly as it changes ownership.*
- **UNLIKELY – 0 pts**

Probable:

A change in ownership would likely result in the loss of FWP's ability to positively impact the habitat on this property through perpetual means. Many ranches and properties along the Missouri River, associated uplands and mountain foothill habitats in Lewis & Clark and Cascade County, have undergone landownership changes in recent years. These landownership changes are often to buyers primarily interested in recreation or subdivision over agricultural values, along with associated public access limitations. The heightened interest in intermountain foothill and riparian habitats makes protection of these private lands extremely critical.



Trends in the Missouri River valley is toward subdivision, intensive farming and winter grazing to maximize production and income. River bottom riparian, grassland and shrub grassland habitats are sometimes cleared and broken for intensive farming. Adjacent mountain and adjoining foothill habitats in the area have experienced subdivision and alternative nonagricultural uses (i.e. Missouri River, Devil's Kitchen, Stickney Creek, Dearborn, and Sudden Valley Subdivisions).

Landowners are interested in perpetually conserving the property's exceptional fish and wildlife habitats, passing the ranch onto future generations and providing public recreational opportunities. Nontraditional interests are purchasing lands along the Missouri River and associated mountain foothill habitats for recreational and subdivision purposes. When this occurs, public recreation and habitat enhancement/protections are typically forever lost.

**c) Focal Priority – up to 10 pts.** *(The purpose of this criteria is to show a fit with existing strategic planning efforts.)*

Describe as follows:

- Does the proposal occur within a 2015 SWAP Regional Focus Area? (4 pts)
- Is this proposal part of an ongoing multi-partner initiative? (3 pts)
- Does the proposal comprise substantial grasslands within an FWP Grassland Initiative priority county? (3 pts)
- Is the proposal within an identified priority area in a species or multi-species conservation plan? (3 pts)
- Does the proposal support an identified connectivity area/corridor? (3 pts)

Sheep Creek Ranch lies within four different community types identified for greatest conservation need (CTGCN) as defined in the SWAP, See #8. As part of habitat protection standards as outlined in SWAP, effort should be made to “continue to utilize Habitat Montana (FWP, 1994) and other funding sources to support opportunities to conserve high priority CTGCN through fee title acquisitions and conservation easements” (SWAP, 2015). This indicates how diverse this landscape is. The ranch lies within the Big Belt mountain complex which is a key corridor in grizzly bear expansion and connectivity between the NCDE and GYE.

The property also provides habitat for at least 3 amphibian, 20 bird, 6 mammal, and 1 reptile species in greatest need of conservation (SWAP). Per MTNHP, there is 1 mammal, 1 bird and 1 fish Species of Concern on the property. All species present, or located in nearby, can be influenced by land practices one private landowner implements.

**d) Geographic Effectiveness – up to 10 pts.** *(This pertains how the property is configured. For example: Is the land in multiple smaller parcels or a large single parcel? One parcel is better than many isolated parcels. Is the land configured in a manner that supports the conservation values? Is the land adjacent to other protected lands or intermingled with or adjacent to FWP or*



*other public lands, leveraging a larger block of conservation? Is this a “postage stamp” or of sufficient size to stand alone?)*

Sheep Creek Ranch is one contiguous block interspersed with some BLM lands. The property encompasses the headwaters of Sheep Creek, a tributary to the Missouri River. The property is located approximately 10 miles north of the FWP owned Beartooth WMA and about 15 miles southeast of the FWP Birdtail Conservation Easement. It is also located just south of four other FWP conservation easements in the Missouri River corridor (Bird Creek Ranch, Chokecherry Bend, Pheasant Bend and Riverdale Ranch Conservation Easements).

- e) **Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunity and other recreation – up to 10 pts.** *(Provide a layout of hunting and fishing opportunities and anticipated access arrangement. Is there well-established legal access? Easier access and areas that accommodate more days of recreation support a higher score. What other forms of recreation would occur on the property? Given location, what is the likelihood of substantial public use? Lands with a history of providing public access should receive a higher score.)*

Sheep Creek Ranch falls within FWP’s Deer/Elk Hunting District 445, Bighorn Sheep HD 455 and Bear Management Unit 440. This area has a long history of community and collaborative game and land management through cooperative efforts from FWP, Landowners, state and Federal agencies, outfitters, and sportspeople. The Devil’s Kitchen Working Group has been actively involved in area fish, wildlife and land management since the groups’ inception in 1989. The Group has local, state and National recognition as one of the best cooperative public/private wildlife and land management efforts. The property has some of the best private land wildlife and fishery habitats in the area and could perpetually provide exceptional hunting, hiking, fishing and wildlife viewing opportunities to the public. Sheep Creek Ranch also provides much of the “core” native bighorn sheep habitats in the area. The Devil’s Kitchen Elk Management Unit has about 4,000 elk at its current status, which about 200-300 are in the Sheep Creek drainage. The ranch is also part of the Devil’s Kitchen mule deer trend area (HD 445), typically observing about 350-450 mule deer in the trend area, about half in the Sheep Creek area. White-tailed deer also utilize the forested habitats of the ranch. The landowners have participated in many bighorn sheep augmentation efforts and are enrolled in a bighorn sheep SAP (Special Access Project) with FWP. Currently about 50-100 bighorn sheep inhabit the Sheep Creek basin.

The Missouri River Holter Dam tailwater fishery is a 30-mile reach of river between Holter Dam and the town of Cascade. It is the number 1 fishery in Montana over the past 5 years averaging 176,000 angler days per year and generating about \$59 million in revenue to the state’s economy. Montana FWP manages 17 fishing access sites in this reach to accommodate the high public use. The riparian habitats of Sheep Creek tributary provide exceptional spawning and rearing habitats for fish species of the Missouri River. These properties also provide a significant upstream source of water quality for the Missouri River. About 4% of the annual rainbow trout spawning (Grisak et al. 2012) and



6% of the annual brown trout spawning (Grisak 2012) for the Missouri River and tributaries occur in Sheep Creek. The property has the potential to provide exceptional public fishing opportunities with this easement.

Due to the property's mountainous habitats, typical farming and ranching practices are not possible for the Landowners. Livestock use of the property is not feasible due to steep mountainous terrain, zero fences and lack of productive grassland vegetation required by cattle and other domestic livestock. Timber harvest potential exists as a limited long-term income source but is not sustainable. The Landowner implements some outfitting for deer/elk/bear/lion during the hunting seasons, which is their primary source of income. The landowner would like to maintain some limited outfitting on the property to preserve some of this income potential, while providing equal or more public hunting opportunities as so long it does not conflict with the purpose of this easement nor the public. No deer outfitting occurs on the ranch. Season structure for deer/elk limits outfitting opportunity as HD 445 has a 6-week archery and 5-week rifle season. Archery is general license. Rifle is 2 weeks Either Sex elk, 3 weeks antlerless elk. There are also limited entry either sex elk permits valid all 5 weeks (45 permits). Deer hunting is general license both archery and rifle season in its entirety. Fee hunting/outfitting could be limited to two weeks archery elk, one-week rifle elk, two weeks spring bear and winter lion hunting as an example. Fishing, hiking, camping and wildlife viewing opportunities would also be provided by this easement. Access would be further detailed in the Management Plan.







- f) **Management Considerations – 10 pts.** *(What are the initial and ongoing obligations and liabilities associated with this proposal? Less is better. For example – Tax and fee obligations, such as irrigation water fees? Infrastructure improvements for grazing management or other needs? Additional staffing and equipment needs? Juxtaposition to other Wildlife Division and FWP land interests? Houses or other buildings that would need maintenance or removal? Weed issues?)*

Sheep Creek Ranch is owned fee title by Don Harland. All taxes are paid and up to date. Additional wildlife and/or habitat monitoring needs may be justified to develop baseline information in order to better understand current wildlife presence and distribution and/or monitor, maintain and/or improve habitat conditions.

Application of conservation easement covenants, along with required implementation of best forest management practices will be sufficient to perpetually protect the fish and wildlife habitat and recreational values associated with this property. Potential habitat improvements exist related to forest management practices. Various terms related specifically to nesting and wintering big game, native species and furbearer habitat will be addressed in the easement. Covenants will be implemented affecting housing development, grazing, mechanically modifying/burning/clearing vegetation, insecticide/herbicide use, wetland draining, and protecting snags in riparian habitats. Easement restrictions on use of domestic sheep/goats on the property would also be implemented to protect bighorn sheep herd health.



**HD 455 Bighorn Sheep Harvested SAC, 2018.**





## REFERENCES

- Montana Natural Heritage Program and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. 2013b. Montana Species of Greatest Conservation Need List. <https://apps.fwp.mt.gov/gis/maps/fwpMapper/>
- Montana Natural Heritage Program and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. 2013b. Montana Species of Greatest Inventory Need List. <https://apps.fwp.mt.gov/gis/maps/fwpMapper/>
- Montana's State Wildlife Action Plan. 2015. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, 1420 East Sixth Avenue, Helena, MT 59620.
- Grisak, G.G, A.C. Strainer, and B.B. Tribby. 2012. Rainbow trout spawning characteristics and relation to the parasite *Myxobolus cerebralis* in the Missouri River, Montana. Intermountain Journal of Sciences. 18: 6-19.
- Grisak, G. 2012. Rainbow trout and brown trout spawning redd survey and fecundity analysis for the Missouri River. PPL-Montana MOTAC projects–Holter Dam Tailwater Fishery 003-08, 753-09, 757-10. Montana Fish, wildlife & Parks, Great Falls.